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America Is Unsecured

After 25 years of living in the United States (as an immigrant from Israel, often considered an Italian), I still cannot get used to the loose security of my adopted country. Married to a Hispanic, I often run into citizens of Mexico and El Salvador who walked into the country across the Rio Grande. On campus, I teach students from Iran and assorted Palestinians who simply stayed in the United States after their visas expired.

My American-born colleagues often talk about such illegal immigrants with mixed emotions. They wish to provide a haven for refugees; they are offended by the exploitation of these refugees by some American farmers; they view these immigrants as competing with American workers and straining our social services. Drug pushing across the poriferous border is also mentioned.

However, nobody, in my experience, mentions that able-bodied spies and terrorists may cross the Rio Grande at least with the same ease as maids seeking household work in the North. Indeed, it seems it would be quite easy to march a small division into the United States, every night, for quite a while. (People who feel that I am exaggerating should note: this is happening now, only the "divisions" want to work rather than to foment trouble.)

I chuckle when I read that the FBI does not have enough people to shadow all the Soviet and Eastern bloc diplomats stationed in the United States, many of whom are believed to be spies.

Our reluctance to draw secure lines is evident not merely at the border, but also in the lackadaisical security at military bases, missile sites and nuclear facilities. Of all the recent events, the one that I find startling is not the taking of the TWA hostages or the car-bomb driven into an American base. The most telling incident is that of the youngster who walked into the State Department, after all the terrorist acts and the introduction of "new security measures," carrying a full-sized gun, entered the seventh floor where the secrecy of state was working, and shot his mother. Members of a TV crew that followed his footsteps a few days later told me their gear was not examined.

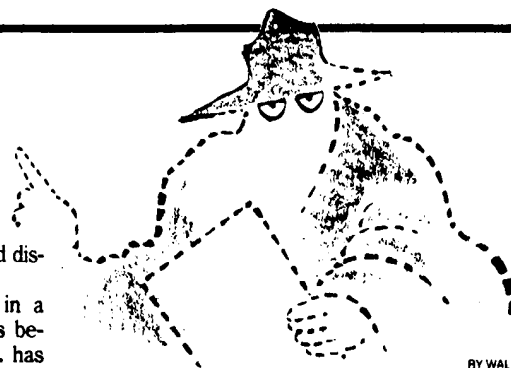
The United States is more than an open country; it is an unsecured one. It displays an attitude that mixes "we are invulnerable" with a rhetoric about

the need to improve security, but a deep-seated distaste for what improving public safety entails.

The matter of attitude was highlighted in a public television symposium on the relations between the military and the press. "The U.S. has an intelligence-gathering satellite that hovers over the U.S.S.R. without which we would be blind, for three years, to what the U.S.S.R. is up to," two leading American reporters were asked to presuppose. "Now assume a classified document on the working of the satellite is leaked to you. Would you publish it?" Both reporters were sure they would on the grounds that maintaining security was the government's job; theirs was to inform the public and "we frequently find that each administration claims threat to security when we seek to publish information they find embarrassing." The reporters did not even consider the question: what if *this time* the publication would . . .

To me the tacit disregard of our vulnerability reflects a lack of adjustment of America to post-modern technological and sociological facts. The United States still acts viscerally as if it were protected by enormous oceans and distance, unreachable by bombers, and as if terrorist attacks are sure to be limited to Beirut or Athens. The 1984 bombing of the Capitol is already forgotten.

When I point to this reluctance to come to terms with the second half of the 20th century, as we should be readying ourselves for the 21st century, I run into a less explicit but potent objection. Many Americans, including well-educated, thoughtful people, feel strongly that tightening security would lower the nation's defenses against the rise of a police state. When I favor the introduction of tamper-proof national ID cards, because they would greatly improve the United States' ability to curb crime, illegal immigration and other intrusions, my colleagues worry that it will make it too easy to hunt down dissenters and to form nationwide black lists. The suggestion that the government will draw on a central computer to track suspects troubles my American-born friends. They worry—the record shows, with some reason—about violation of individual rights: employers and insurance companies may



BY WALLMEYER

discriminate against people who are gay or who are addicts. The suggestion that employees with access to secret information will be subject to random polygraph tests (to which they will consent, as part of their employment contract) raises concerns about self-incrimination.

These objections suggest that our security will have to be strengthened in line with American values and traditions. Before we issue national ID cards, we should pass legislation that strongly prohibits the use of the information the government has about cardholders for purposes other than security. (If we can prevent the IRS data from being used for nonlegitimate goals, this could be achieved here too.) Improved security may well require reliance on some central government computers. However, these computers should be subject to close scrutiny by oversight boards to ensure they will not be abused—for example, to provide corporations with information about potential employees. We may need more screening devices at the entrances to public buildings (in Israel, purses and parcels taken to movie theaters are subject to search; in London, this summer, my briefcase was searched during a visit to the Royal Tournament). We should, though, ensure they serve only to control means of violence.

We succeeded in setting up such screening devices in airports without using the searches involved to go after those who are suspected of carrying controlled substances. Other ways can be found once we realize that we can reduce vulnerability without undermining our freedoms. At least this former foreigner thinks we should not wait until a new, more damaging, act of violence, possibly involving nuclear facilities, hits us before we shore up our security.

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